

District Council report for parishes February 2023

Council Tax

The Vale budget has been finalised and published. You may be surprised to know that the Vale continues to charge one of the lowest district council tax rates in the country. The budget includes a below-inflation increase in Council Tax of 3.4 per cent for 2023-24. For a Band D property, this equates to £5 a year (just under 10p a week), bringing a total charge of £151.69 a year (£2.91 per week) - which is more than 25 per cent lower than the national average. Increases in Council Tax are never popular but we hope that this below-inflation increase is at least acceptable to most residents. The increase was approved at full council by all councillors from every party.

Household help

Although the Vale has now closed the Household Support Fund and are no longer accepting any new applications for this fund help is still available for anyone struggling with the high cost of living. Support is still available through the councils' Community Hub team who offer a wide range of advice, including information on free or affordable food banks and council tax support. The Community Hub Team can also help to signpost people for debt advice and other cost-of-living support and provide information on housing support as well as guidance on how people can look after their mental health and wellbeing.

Anyone in need of support can contact our Community Hub team during office hours on 01235 422600 or they can email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk

Please let any neighbours know about this if they do not use the internet,.

We spent £139,615 to help people with the rising cost of food and energy bills and added £60,000 to funding from the county council to boost the funds available to people and provide support at a time when it's most needed.

Applications already received are currently being processed and all applicants will be informed about whether their application has been successful or not. As there are a high volume of applicants, anyone who has not yet heard back is advised not to contact the councils or advice centres about their applications so that teams can focus on working through the applications - these are being worked through on a first come, first served basis.

Vale EV charging points

The Vale of White Horse District Council's installation of Electric Vehicle chargers at its car parks has seen charging volumes double in its first six months.

In June last year 62 EV chargers were installed across five of the council's car parks in Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage as part of the county-wide Park and Charge scheme.

The number of charging sessions has gone up by 60 per cent in the first six months of installation. During the same period the average amount of electricity consumed has doubled, meaning that people are now using them for longer charges.

Since the first chargers went live in summer 2022 there have been 3,631 charging sessions in the first full six months, which equates to around 169,000 EV miles. This represents a saving 45,863kg of CO₂ if those miles had been driven in a petrol or diesel car.

Saturday is the most popular day of the week to charge an EV in Vale of White Horse and 4pm is the most popular time of day to charge!!

Planning - national consultation

The overall guidance on planning is provided by central government under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>).

Local Plans (ours can be seen at: <https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/planning-and-development/local-plan-and-planning-policies/local-plan-2031/>) are obliged to refer to the NPPF and work within this framework in setting out their own local vision for development. The NPPF is currently under consultation as a part of the Levelling up agenda and is looking to give local authorities more control over housing numbers and also to give local neighbourhood plans more influence. We shall see if this is the case. The East Challow neighbourhood plan is currently being looked at by the examiner and West Challow are looking to prepare a lighter-touch neighbourhood plan which is being piloted together with other villages as a result of a successful application by the Vale to the Dept of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Conversion of unused agricultural building onto dwellings was intended to attract local residents and which might reduce rural poverty. What does happen is that these are frequently converted into high quality, highly desirable residences which are beyond the reach of most local residents such as agricultural workers. It is a shame.

Planning generally

I look at all planning applications that are submitted in our 7 villages and visit some of these which I think raise some difficulties. If you have any concerns either about your own application or one that affects you please do not be afraid to contact me to discuss. Contact details at the bottom of this report.

All future elections – Photo ID now needed!

Please remember that for any future elections, including the local elections in May, you will need photo ID to vote.

Accepted forms of photo ID will include, but are not limited to, passport, driving licence (including provisional license), disabled parking blue badge, certain concessionary travel cards and proof of age cards with a PASS mark. Anyone who doesn't have accepted photo ID can apply on www.gov.uk/apply-for-photo-id-voter-authority-certificate now for a free voter ID document, known as a Voter Authority Certificate.

For more information, visit the www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/voter-id or call their helpline on 0800 328 0280.

Wantage Hospital Maternity Unit

You will know by now that the Maternity Unit in Wantage Hospital (MLU – Midwife-Led Unit) has reopened after much pressure from residents, pressure groups and us on the county

health scrutiny committee (HOSC). It is really good news! We cannot understand where the extra staff came from as we were told that as a result of staff shortages the few staff that we had could not work safely and were therefore seconded to Wallingford. We should not look a gift horse in the mouth but I only hope that we do not have to go through this again!

BOB ICP (Integrated Care Partnership) – The health service again!

Local health services seem to be a perennial issue for us both as residents and local councillors. I am deputy chair of the HOSC, the county health scrutiny committee, and we are constantly perplexed by the constant reorganisation in the health service at county level. It all comes down to limited resources at the end of the day of, course but it does result in the system becoming strained and residents becoming more and more frustrated.

So, the reorganisation of community health at the county level, which, you may remember, arose out of this being done (poorly) in the OX12 postcode, has been overtaken by a new cross-county level of administration (ICS, The Integrated Care System) including Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and West Berks (BOB) which together with the local authorities forms the iCP. It is designed to save money but administration costs p.a. must be in excess of £1 million! It remains to be seen how well this large structure will function. Finally, in addition to try to reduce the crisis in the ambulance service acute hospitals need to discharge more patients to care homes and community hospitals. Wantage Hospital used to have community beds!! Well, we must hope that the teething problems are solved and we get a more effective service.

Together with Oxford Health, HOSC ran a workshop on some of the issues affecting primary care (mainly GPs). One of the good things that came out of it was a positive response to our request that the ICB (Integrated Care Board) appoints a member of staff specifically to oversee primary care infrastructure and dealing with CIL money from housing developments in this county.

Farming – the CAP is no more

I have spoken to a number of local farmers who are concerned about the uncertainty around implementation of the government's flagship Agri-Environmental Legislation, ELMS (the Environmental Land Management System - see www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview) if you are interested. It also has teething problems with pilots being carried out for various parts of it. It is likely that the Sustainable Agriculture arm will be funded more substantially than Biodiversity or Landscape but it does, to some extent, cover both these. It has been suggested to me that this might not be fully "sorted" until 2025!

New hedgerow group

East and West Challow and Childrey have set up a Hedgerow Group to plant and restore missing and gapped hedgerows and to encourage others to do the same. If anyone is interested in getting involved please contact me (contact details below) or Alastair Barclay at abarclay589@gmail.com.

Speeding

The county council is now working its way through our villages introducing 20 mph limits. Nearly all ours are being processed and Childrey now has its signs up. This will inevitably bring speeds down and reduce accidents of the unnecessary sort that we saw a few weeks ago in East Challow.

Heritage buildings

It is important to preserve as many of our old buildings as possible. Not all of them are listed and some very old barns are close to collapse as a result of neglect by the owners. It doesn't take much to maintain these splendid old buildings for the next generation. In East Challow we are trying to save for the village The Old Mission built in 1904 and no longer used for services. Our group met outside on a cold New Year's Day and have posed for the Wantage Herald and would like to see it as a community centre.



Our villages have a number of these heritage assets which give character to the places where we live but which are not nationally designated. For example, in East Challow we have two 19th barns which sit on 18th foundations, one of which is grade II listed and is nevertheless just being allowed to fall down gradually because there is nothing legally that we can do about it. It's a huge shame!!!

Please let me know if you have non-designated heritage buildings of this sort in your villages and let's put together a database for the Vale and perhaps we can start to put some pressure on the owners to preserve these assets for the next generations.

Childrey Way and School Transport

Free School Transport is no longer to be provided for school children in Childrey attending King Alfred's. Parents will be required to drive their children to school although the Head is concerned about safety with so many vehicles arriving at the same time. Alternatively,

children, with or without their parents, are expected to make their way by bicycle or on foot along Childrey Way. This is neither safe nor pleasant for anyone using it for walking or cycling. Residents and the parish, district and county councillors are all pressing the county council hard to have this decision reversed.

I have been told that a hearing is going to take place about this. Let's hope that by the time you read this it has been resolved to the advantage of the residents and their children.

Community bus service

Community bus services through our villages were stopped several years ago as a result of shortage of funds and there have been a few attempts to restart these – unsuccessful so far. Wantage Town Council is now discussing the possibility of some sort of local service being set up with housing development money. I will be involved in the group to discuss this. I will shortly be sending out a questionnaire and would welcome its wider circulation through the villages.

Cllr Dr. Paul Barrow

Paul.Barrow@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

<https://www.facebook.com/Cllr-Dr-Paul-Barrow-104943001583284>

District Councillor for Ridgeway Ward